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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

VOLUME XXX

DECEMBER, 1907

NUMBER 6

Editorial

THE PERIL OF LAWLESSNESS

THE LIBERTY OF THE GOSPEL

The New Testament teaches a doctrine of personal religious liberty. "With freedom did Christ set us free. Stand fast therefore and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage," is the ringing exhortation of the Apostle Paul, in which he but puts in explicit form what was involved in the teaching of Jesus also.

THE PREVALENCE OF THE LAWLESS SPIRIT

But lawlessness is one of the most serious of the perils that confront us in this land and day. We do not refer to the existence of a criminal class that makes a business of breaking law, nor of anarchists, whose theory it is that there should be no law. It is, if possible, a more serious matter, that among the educated and respectable class of the community, even among religious men, disregard of law manifests itself both in small matters and in large. Corporations evade the statutes which were intended to limit their actions in the interest of the common good. Automobilists defy the speed regulations. Officials, sworn to obey and execute the laws, take advantage of their official position and power to extort money from criminals and honest citizens, and make of law a mockery and a scoffing. Travelers avoid payment of customs, and evasion of taxes is, in some quarters, almost taken for granted. Nor are these merely technical violations of civil statutes. In many cases at least they involve danger and work injury to others. They violate the fundamental principle of morality. They undermine character, corrupt the minds of the youth, and weaken the moral fiber of the nation.

How shall we escape this evil of lawlessness? Must we surrender the liberty which Jesus taught and for which Paul contended? If not, how shall we conserve our liberty and not become participators in and encouragers of lawlessness?

INDIFFERENCE TO THE EVIL IMPOSSIBLE

The result cannot be achieved by simply letting things drift. It will not do to say that this is the spirit of the age, which it is useless to resist; the tide will turn some day; but now there is nothing to do but to float with it. The issue is too vital, the damage to character too great, the danger to the church and the nation too serious to permit such a *laissez-faire* policy.

LEGALISM AN INEFFECTUAL CORRECTIVE

But neither can the danger be averted by a return to legalism. That experiment has been tried too often, its result is too evident to make it necessary or permissible to repeat it again. The Phariseism of the first century and the Puritanism of the seventeenth had their noble qualities. They were at least morally earnest and recognized the supremacy of the moral in life. They were vastly better than mere frivolousness, or sensuality, or high-handed lawlessness. But Puritanism is not the last or the best word of the experience of the past to the men of the future. An element of legalism must enter into the childhood history of individuals and races. But it is not the solution of the world's problem. The experience of Paul epitomizes that of the race. Mere legalism, however strict or strenuous, can never develop real morality. Without the element of voluntariness, morality lacks the vital breath.

It is, moreover, self-defeating. For in proportion as it dominates the minds of men, it destroys the power even to construct a code adapted to existing conditions. For losing sight of principles in its exclusive attention to rules, it deprives itself of all basis of intelligent decision. The time past may suffice to have proved the insufficiency of legalistic morality.

INTELLIGENT SPIRITUALITY

Where then is the corrective of the evil? It is to be found where Christ and Paul found it, in intelligent spirituality. By this we mean

what Paul meant when, confronting the very danger we are considering, he wrote to the Galatians, Walk by the Spirit and you will not fulfil the desire of the flesh; be led by the Spirit and you are not under law.

Such intelligent spirituality presupposes a fundamentally religious view of life. It recognizes the fact of moral obligation and of an authority exceeding that of any man or body of men, and yields allegiance to that authority. In Christian environment such allegiance expresses itself in the acceptance of Christ as the leader of life.

But one may do all this and still be a legalist. As distinguished from legalism, intelligent spirituality involves the recognition of the fact that no code that ever was written can fully express the moral obligations of life, or has in itself the moral dynamic to make men good. This law cannot do in that it is weak through the flesh. The solution of the problem of life must be found not in a body of rules long enough and minute enough to cover each possible exigency of life, but in a principle simple and single, yet covering the whole of life and in a spiritual force that gives this principle controlling power.

Because these things are so, intelligent spirituality involves thoughtfulness. The legalist may in more or less mechanical fashion follow out the rules of his code. But the acceptance of a single principle of conduct entails thinking that one may act in accordance with the principle in the constantly varying exigencies of life. Spirituality thus demands intellectuality. The spiritually minded man cannot remain uneducated. He may not have great store of knowledge, but he must be thoughtful, and thoughtfulness in the application of moral principles to life is itself an education.

But the moral problems of life cannot be met by thoughtfulness alone. Virtue must become spontaneous. Action must often be instantaneous with no time for reflection and balancing of arguments. Right action must become a habit, the natural response of the soul to the situation, however suddenly arising. Such a habit is the product of two influences. It demands on the one hand solitude and receptivity; on the other, vigorous activity. It is cultivated by meditation upon the highest ideals of life, which find their noblest embodiment in the life and teachings of Christ and of those who have walked most closely in the footsteps of the Master. It calls for fellowship with

God in prayer, a rooting of the personal life deep in the life of the Eternal Father. Every strong life must have its mystical side—its indefinable but real fellowship with the divine.

But for its development such character demands activity also. Of the two relations between conduct and character—for character is both product and cause of conduct—the influence of conduct on character has been in the past too little emphasized. Educators have done well to remind us that we learn by doing. It has been rightly insisted that to bring forth good fruit the tree must itself be good. But it has sometimes been forgotten that character without conduct is wholly inert and valueless, and that character is itself as truly the product of doing as doing of character.

The establishment of the principle of love for one's neighbor, the recognition of the fact that his well-being is as valuable and as deserving of consideration as one's own, not as a theoretically beautiful proposition, but as the ruling force in one's life, converted by repeated doing into a fixed habit and dominant impulse—this is the remedy, the only adequate remedy, for the tendency to lawlessness which exists wherever there is liberty. This is the only effective corrective.

Will it be said that such a remedy is utopian, and that we must find some shorter route by which to reach our end? It is true that the state must continue to enforce law and to punish law-breakers. It is true also that Christian teachers must insist, as Paul did, upon obedience to civil law as imperatively demanded by the principle of love to one's neighbor. But the greater need, nevertheless, is for character and principle that will respond to such an appeal; any corrective of the evil which falls short of this is only healing the hurt of the people slightly. The only adequate remedy for lawlessness is the Christian character that is developed by intelligent spirituality.